



Fellowship Combines Veteran Care with VA Career Development

Quinn Kennedy, Ph.D. and Ruth O'Hara, Ph.D.

The VA Special Fellowship Program in Advanced Psychiatry and Psychology was a strong presence at the National MIRECC Conference. Fellows and Fellowship Directors from eight MIRECC sites participated in a host of activities geared towards improving veteran care and informing attendees of career development opportunities within the VA system. In addition, the Fellowship Hubsite hosted 16 junior clinical investigators, selected through a national competition, who were interested in learning more about the clinical and research activities of the VA and of the MIRECCs.

A poster reception on the first night of the conference kicked off the Fellowship activities. Fellows presented posters on their clinical research during the reception and, along with invited junior investigators, conversed with senior MIRECC investigators, clinicians, and administrators. The next day, the Fellows and invited junior investigators participated in two special sessions. The first focused on ca-

reer development for junior clinical investigators and covered both federal and VA opportunities, as well as opportunities in translational research. The second session entailed a mock study review session in which a panel of experts critiqued different types of grant applications. Here attendees could see exactly how different types of grants are reviewed and what components of the grant are essential for a successful application. Fellows and guests also had a private lunch hosted by the Fellowship Hubsite, where invited junior investigators learned more about the Fellowship program and about the MIRECCs from the Fellows and the Fellowship Hubsite Director, Dr. Ruth O'Hara. On the final day of the conference, a panel of Fellows presented on their research, geared towards improving veteran care. Overall, the Fellowship played an important role at the conference both for the Fellows, by disseminating pertinent career development information, and for the MIRECCs by showcasing future leaders in the field of mental health.



Highlights of the poster reception sponsored by the VA Special Fellowship Program in Advanced Psychiatry and Psychology

Photos by John Junginger, Michael Kauth & Louise Mahoney; Photo collage by Timothy Mahoney

Vietnam Veterans Speak *(Continued from page 1)*

Both Tices are professional therapists and have worked to de-stigmatize mental illness and promote mental health services for veterans. In 1980, Mr. Tice worked in the Vietnam Veteran Outreach Program that eventually became the Readjustment Counseling Program ("Vet Center"). He retired in 1999 as Associate Regional Manager for Counseling with the Region 4A Vet Center. Mr. Tice maintains an active schedule as a writer and public speaker. Mrs. Tice is a disability counselor at the University of Washington at Tacoma.

Mr. Moe Armstrong opened the conference with a moving speech, presenting himself as a person who lives and struggles with mental illness every day. Mr. Armstrong described his life with schizophrenia and explained how he learned to cope with the symptoms. He noted that on a daily basis, he struggles to "not hear things in the middle of the night." He gave a touching summary of his military experiences in Vietnam, his experience with mental illness, and his eventual homelessness. Mr. Armstrong had a strong distrust of the government until an outreach worker brought him to the VA for treatment. For the past 30 years and since that day, the VA has been Mr. Armstrong's primary healthcare provider and he expressed his gratitude for the care he has received.

Mr. Armstrong stated that individuals with mental illness deserve respect, as does our mental health system. He decried the treatment of mental illness in health care today, saying that mental health is often viewed as a "black hole." Mr. Armstrong proclaimed, "When people ask what I do, I tell them that *I save lives!* We have got to stop being apologists. *We in Mental Health save lives!*" He added that it is important for the VA to continue to develop mental health programs that target both veterans and their families. Telepsychiatry initiatives are one example of extending mental health services out into the community. Peer support groups are another example. He noted that peer support groups, telemedicine, and Vet Centers can also serve as research, education, and clinical laboratories for MIRECCs to develop more effective treatments.

Mr. Armstrong currently serves on the Board of Directors for the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI). He is also the Director of Consumer and Family Affairs at the Vinfen Corporation in Boston, where, with his wife, Naomi Armstrong, he established the Peer Educators Project. This project trains individuals with mental illness and their families to serve as educators and to provide support resources to help other families live with mental illness. In addition, Mr. Armstrong created Vet-to-Vet support groups; the VISN 1 MIRECC is evaluating the effectiveness of these groups. ♦



Al Batres, Ph.D., & Don Smith from the Readjustment Counseling Service

Photo by Louise Mahoney

Partners for Veterans' Mental Health Care

The national MIRECC conference in Portland provided an opportunity for the MIRECCs to discuss strategies for collaboration among themselves and with the co-sponsors – the VA Readjustment Counseling Service ("Vet Centers") and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI). Vet Centers and NAMI – especially state NAMI affiliates – are critical partners with VA in addressing the needs of veterans with mental illness and their family members.

Represented at the conference were the Office of Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS), RCS Western Mountain Region 4A, Bellingham WA Vet Center, Oregon NAMI, VA Office for Telemedicine, and VA Mental Health Strategic Health Care Group and its Informatics Section, in addition to the eight MIRECCs. ♦

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